

California Bear Flag: Symbol of Strength

The original Bear Flag was made in the Sonoma barracks on June 14 or 15, 1846. The flag consisted of a three by five foot section of unbleached cotton upon which were drawn a red star and a rough representation of a grizzly bear as an emblem of strength. In blackberry juice were painted the words, "California Republic." A piece of red flannel was sewn onto the bottom to produce a red stripe. The Bear Flag flew over Sonoma for nearly a month until it was replaced on July 9, 1846 by the Stars and Stripes. Other Bear Flags, four or more of them, were made between June 15 and July 9 for use at Bodega Bay and elsewhere.

"At a company meeting it was determined that we should raise a flag, and that it should be a bear en passant [French: 'in passing'], with one star. One of the ladies at the garrison gave us a piece of brown domestic, and Mrs. Captain John Sears gave us some strips of red flannel about 4 inches wide. The domestic was new, but the flannel was said to have been part of a petticoat worn by Mrs. Sears across the mountains...I took a pen, and with ink drew the outline of the bear and star upon the white cloth. Linseed oil and Venetian red were found in the garrison, and I painted the bear and star... Underneath the bear and star were printed with a pen the words 'California Republic' in Roman letters. In painting the words I first lined out the letters with a pen, leaving out the letter 'i' and putting 'c' where 'i' should have been, and afterwards the 'i' over the 'c.' It was made with ink, and we had nothing to remove the marks."

-William L. "Bill" Todd, artist of original Bear Flag

When the original Bear Flag was lowered at Sonoma July 9, it was given as a memento to one of the sons of Captain Montgomery of the U.S.S. Portsmouth, then at anchor in San Francisco Bay. Montgomery took the flag to Washington, D.C., where it was placed in the archives of the Naval Department. In 1855, at the request of California's Congressional delegation, the flag was returned to California for permanent display in the San Francisco headquarters of the Society of California Pioneers. This original flag was subsequently destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. A copy of the flag stands on display at the Sonoma Historic Park in Sonoma, California.



Historic California Bear Flag as photographed in 1890. Courtesy of The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, www.sfmuseum.org.



Official California State Flag. Various bear images graced the California flag until 1953, when Don G. Kelley, the founding editor and art director of the magazine *Pacific Discovery*, was commissioned to design the official state flag.

Resources

"California's Emblem: The Grizzly Bear," by Tracy L. Storer. *Discovering California*, a selection of articles from *Pacific Discovery Magazine*, California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, 1983.

California Conquered. Neal Harlow, 1982. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Vallejo and the Four Flags: The True Story of Early California. Esther J. Comstock, 1979. Comstock Bonanza Press, Grass Valley, California.

Pioneers of California: True Stories of Early Settlers in the Golden State. Donovan Lewis, 1993. Scottwall Associates, San Francisco.

Article courtesy of Sonoma State Historic Park, State of California Department of Parks and Recreation.